Approaches to Social Change

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It is with a certain amount of fear and trepidation that I approach this topic of social change. I sense that this topic is a terribly sensitive one, one that provokes rather violent emotions. I don't understand why it is this way but it seems to be a historical fact. When we read the history of socialism in Europe from 1880 to 1910 we discover that those people who advocated a 'socialist' approach to economics and politics disagreed violently with one another. When we study the history of the NPA in the Philippines we discover, similarly, a story of many violent disagreements, disagreements that often ended with killings. I am sure that many who read this paper will be very angry with me.

The structure of this paper is simple. Since social action and social change are very complex and very ambiguous concepts I will attempt to clarify them by presenting five different approaches to social change. After presenting each of these approaches and the reasons why people advocate them I will proceed to criticize each of them.

1) The classical Marxist approach. In Marxist theory social change occurs by necessity because of a law of history. The oppressive injustices of capitalism will increase until a violent upheaval occurs when the proletarian rises up and overthrows their capitalistic oppressors. This will result in a state of social equality where no social classes exist. As individuals we may participate in this necessary social change by finding a way to create more discontent and more violence.

In the Philippines this approach to social change is followed by the NPA and the National Democratic Front. They insist on following the strict party line and avoid, for the most part, involving themselves in normal

political or economic life. When Corazon Aquino won the snap election and took office in 1986 the NPA did not support her. They didn't want the improvement that her government would possibly bring. Rather they wanted the situation to get worse so that a violent revolution would result.

What can we say by way of evaluation of this approach to social change? Certainly its goal of a classless society where equality reigns is very admirable. The inequalities that have always plagued human society are a true evil that need to be overcome.

However, it seems that we can question this theory in many ways. It is highly questionable that a capitalist economic system must necessarily move toward greater and greater exploitation of the workers. What has generally happened in the last 150 years is that many workers have come to benefit more and more from the economic success of capitalism. The 'scientific' law of Marxism doesn't seem to be valid.

Secondly, it does seem that if we put all of our hope on the violent revolution that Marxists dream about we will miss the many opportunities for improving our societies that arise in daily lives. Each of these improvements may be rather minor but over a period of time they may amount to something quite significant.

2) There is a "revisionist" Marxism which sees social change coming about through various types of activity which work within the present system. We find this approach being advocated by various German and French thinkers in the latter part of the 19th century. In Europe and the United States socialists made efforts to improve the situation of workers by introducing legislation which would limit the number of hours that a laborer was required to work, fighting to reduce the number of hours from 12 to 8 and the number of work days from 7 to 5. In many modern societies this approach is found in efforts to raise the minimum wage that is paid workers.

In the Philippines this revisionist approach expresses itself in efforts to provide better housing and

communities for the poor. (We have this in the Gawad Kalinga movement of the Couples for Christ.) It would also show itself in various attempts to provide better education for poor children. Health care efforts seek to provide basic medical care for rural areas. In the realm of politics people make efforts of various types to ensure that there are honest elections.

How do we evaluate such a "revisionist" approach to social action? It seems, first of all, to be very natural. We live in a world which is incomplete. We humans have been given life in order to bring it to a higher state of completion. Secondly, this approach seems very admirable as we work to make the world a better place for others. We show our love for them by improving the situation in which they live.

When we as teachers view this approach, however, it seems obvious that this type of social change cannot be a primary involvement of our lives. We have assumed a role in our communities to teach the young people who come to our schools. This role is very demanding, taking up most of our time and energy. Since it is our primary social responsibility it would be wrong for us to neglect our teaching to seek improvement of our society in these other areas. Our primary obligation to society is to teach. Our social role is significant but it is limited.

Of course, we may take an active role at election time to make sure that there is no dishonesty in the counting of votes in our local precinct. But we are not in a position to provide health care to the poor. We leave that to the doctors and nurses. We are not in a position to pass laws which will benefit workers. We leave that sort of activity to those in political life.

3) There is a distinctive type of social action which sees its main role to consist in bringing to people's attention the social evils that are present in a society. A century ago this approach was labeled 'muck raking' where journalists focused on the poverty and injustice in human society. In the Philippines this approach was exemplified in the emphasis on 'structural analysis' where Philippine

society was continually being examined and continually found to be 'sick'. More recently this approach is followed by the "Ehem" movement which focuses for the most part on political corruption.

The reason behind such an approach is not entirely clear. One possible explanation (based on classical Marxism) might be that the pointing out of evils might lead to a violent revolution. People are led to be so disgusted with a certain social evil that they will turn to arms to end it. A second explanation for this practice is the satisfaction that is attained in affirming the presence of social evils. Evil in all of its various forms is always fascinating. Just as people take delight in reading newspapers with all their stories of calamities, violence and corruption so they find a certain sick satisfaction in hearing once again about graft and corruption. A third explanation might be the sense of 'self-righteousness' that I come to feel when I point out such evils. In doing this I come to feel that I am morally superior to others.

We may question, however, whether this approach of pointing out social evils is truly effective in achieving its purpose of reforming and changing social practices. Does it really lead to a reform of society? When I become more explicitly aware of the corrupt practices of certain politicians, priests and social leaders my heightened awareness does not change those people and the way they live.

We can question further whether there is any 'action' in this form of social action. It seems to be completely a matter of 'talk' where you call attention to an evil. Nothing is changed by your talk, leading us to suspect that it is 'empty talk'.

4) There is a fourth approach to social action which I choose to call 'technological'. There has been a considerable amount of writing by European philosophers about this structure of human life called technology. What they are talking about is not a matter of machines and engineering skills but rather a way of living that structures and controls the way we live and think. It

is something that has appeared in our modern world, something that was not there before.

Caught up in this structure we find ourselves as isolated monads of awareness who look out on a world and people who stand 'out there', separated from us. (Philosophers will recognize the origin of this way of thinking and living in the cogito of Descartes.) We are forced to relate to this outside world by means of an idea, plan or theory which we formulate within ourselves. We use this idea, plan or theory in order to know this outside world and to deal with it. So in this approach there is an emphasis on two things: first, the plan that I in my isolation formulate and, secondly, the technique that I use to deal with that world outside of me.

As Heidegger points out, one of the results of this technological way of living is that everything is revealed as a resource, a 'means' that is to be utilized to achieve the goal of the technology. The iron ore of the earth is seen as a means to achieve a jeepney. Human beings are seen as 'labor' and making use of them is resource management. I am guided to see myself as a worker or producer. The meaning and value of my life is found in my productivity.

Many of the presentations of social action are coming from such a technological way of thinking and living. There is, for instance, a great emphasis on drawing up a program or plan for social change. Once they set that up they proclaim that it is the basic orientation of their lives. Many examples of this approach could be given. I choose to focus on the 'Policy Statement' drawn up in May of 2006 by the social apostolate people of the Jesuit province. In this statement these people reaffirmed "their commitment to social change and transformation". It was a comprehensive statement, dealing with the economic, political, social, environmental, health and educational problems of the Philippines.

How can we evaluate such a technological approach to social change?

Positively, we cannot help but admire such a

statement. The conditions of the poor need to be improved and it is reassuring to know that these leaders of the Jesuits are committed to that improvement. Furthermore, each of us who is associated with a Jesuit institution cannot help but feel proud when we think that our lives are oriented toward such a noble effort.

Negatively, however, we find three reasons for questioning such an approach. First of all, we are forced to question whether this statement is anything more than giving ourselves to an impossible dream. We ask the basic philosophical question: Is it real? How could it be possible for these twenty people in social action to solve all of the problems of eighty million Filipinos? How could this possibly be real?

We can ask the further question: What precisely are you actually doing to solve these problems and to bring about social change? What concrete projects do you plan to implement in order to bring your plan to realization? When, out of curiosity, I asked these questions of one of the participants at that meeting last May I received the answer that they will need a further meeting in order to plan how to implement their policy statement. It seems that as of the present they are not doing anything concrete nor do they have any precise plans to do anything concrete.

To appreciate this approach to social action (where you emphasize the plan, the theory or the policy statement) we need to bear in mind that the people who follow this style of living (technological people) tend to believe that the making of a plan and the proclamation of a plan is itself social action or social change. A policy paper represents the achievement of something real. They spend an extraordinary amount of time in discussing with others and drawing up such plans. Since such effort seems to be achieving something (the plan) they feel justified in ignoring any possible implementation of the plan. This mind-set follows the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who affirmed that "What is rational is real." In this world the important thing is what we have in our minds; what is present there is real. This

is a rather common way of living and thinking. We find it in those people who draw up a "mission vision" for a school and then proclaim that the "vision" that they have drawn up expresses the real orientation of that school.

A technological world is necessarily a world of "talk" where there is an emphasis on what is said. Jacques Ellul will emphasize that propaganda is a necessary element of technology where people are led to give themselves to achieve a certain goal. For good or for evil such a world guides people to live in "talk". (The PAACSU says that we are a good school. We live in that talk. The World Bank gives the Philippines a poor credit rating. Economists live in that talk. A politician affirms his love for the poor. Voters live in that propaganda. Students give teachers a good or poor evaluation. We teachers live in that talk.) The dominance of talk in technology is similar to the world of talk that Kierkegaard found in the crowd , the "they" self. (When 'they say' that you are successful then you are successful. When 'they say that a certain song is beautiful then it is beautiful.)

Like Kierkegaard we question such a world of talk. Is it real? When the "social action" people (of this fourth type) say something, does that mean that what they say is truly real or is it just propaganda, talk that guides us to follow them. Of course, they would be angry if you questioned them since in their technological world if they have said something, it must be real.

A second problem with this technological approach to social change is that it is a way of thinking and living that is highly abstract. It lives in the realm of ideals and generalities and is out of contact with any particular concrete situation. Its language uses abstract words such as social change, the poor, oppression, injustice and corruption. The motivation that drives the lives of these people does not come from the concrete needs of a situation or from the values that are part of that concrete situation but from the demands of their minds. They have an abstract sense of the ideal society where poverty and inequality are banished forever and the possibility of

that ideal drives them like a categorical imperative. It is an absolute demand coming from the world of ideas and not from the concrete world.

One problem that arises from this abstract character of technological social action is that the value present here is a very limited one. In concrete human life we encounter values that we give our hearts to. We are willing to sacrifice ourselves and even to die for those values. A mother sacrifices herself for her children, a teacher can dedicate herself to serving her students, a nurse is committed to care for her patients. But is anyone here tempted to sacrifice himself for this policy paper? Of course not. Not even those who drew it up are willing to sacrifice themselves for it. Abstractions do not inspire dedication and self-sacrifice.

It should be noted that for the persons caught up in technology, in this abstract world of ideals, plans and policy statements, what is experienced in this world is real and, for them, concrete. They will look critically on philosophy teachers who are struggling to guide particular students to read, to reflect and to face up to life. They will consider such teachers to be 'ivory tower' people, people who live 'within their own minds', out of touch with reality. For what is concrete for these people is this abstract world of ideals and plans that is found in their technological way of living.

We come back to our basic philosophical question: what is truly real, the ideal, abstract world of the technological social action people or the concrete world of the philosophy teacher as she deals with her students?

A third problem with this approach is that it is 'absolutistic' where something is proclaimed as the absolute answer to a question. This way of thinking arose in modern philosophy where philosophers fell in love the human ability (in the realm of mathematical reason) to make statements which seemed to be absolutely true. If 2 plus 2 is four is absolutely true then we must be able to make statements about human life which possess the same degree of absoluteness. Karl Marx will affirm

that capitalism will necessarily end in a catastrophic revolution. The authors of the Social Action Jesuit policy paper for the Philippines are no less absolutistic. They have the one and only answer to the problems of the Philippines and they demand that everyone agree with them and follow them.

This is not surprising. In any technological world there is one set plan that must guide everyone, one set procedure that everyone must follow. Technology demands uniformity. Salesgirls in a mall all go through certain set procedures in dealing with customers. All Marxists must follow a set 'party line'. All teachers in a school must follow one set grading system. This demand for uniformity does not come from authoritarian leaders but from the basic structure of a technological world. Life in a technological world must be lived uniformly. When I went to the Ateneo de Naga in the year 2000 I was confronted with the school's Corplan 2010, a set of objectives that had been decreed for the school. Together with the other teachers I was drilled in those objectives and we were made to understand that these guidelines were basic for all of our activity as teachers. There was no room for questioning that plan for the school.

Because of this demand for uniformity in a technological world there is no room for individual freedom, for individual interpretation or a spontaneous way of life. There must be "synergism", where everyone thinks the same way and acts the same way. The policy paper of the social action apostolate, for instance, does not acknowledge any individual author; it is a group project, created by a group and something that must be followed by everyone in the Jesuit Philippine province. Pressure is being put on people to support this plan.

This approach is questionable since one of the great blessings of human life is individual freedom and the uniqueness of individuals where each person has her

own 'way' of doing things and makes a contribution to society in terms of that unique way. God treats each one of us in a different way and calls each one of us to live a unique vocation. Human society is blessed by these unique contributions.

5) There is a fifth approach to social action that generally is overlooked by people in social action. This fifth approach is a way of living where we are sensitive to the needs of the social situation where we are living and working. We respond to the values that are found in that situation. As mothers we feed our children. As doctors we seek to cure the illnesses of our patients. As security guards we protect business establishments. As jeepney drivers we transport people. Finally, as teachers we try to teach our students. Each of these forms of work are carried on in society, they are social action. Each of them makes a worthwhile contribution to the welfare of the people of our society.

Are these forms of social action also forms of social change? Of course they are. Mothers change their children and make them fat by feeding them. Doctors improve the health of their patients. Jeepney drivers facilitate the economic and educational growth of the towns where they function. Human life goes forward and all of these forms of work facilitate that forward movement.

Notice that this fifth approach to social action is not based on a theory or a plan. It is guided by the workers' sense of the needs of the situation, the values that are there and the grace of God that is given them.

How can we evaluate this fifth form of social action? Positively, we can say that it is a very concrete way of living, filled with all the meaningfulness of concrete living. As a teacher, for instance, I am challenged by the situation and inspired by it, experiencing that my life is enriched by such challenges and inspirations. Furthermore, there is real change occurring in my life and in my students' lives as life goes forward.

Negatively, we must admit that this movement forward may seem to be rather disordered. Since there

is no overall plan which determines what workers do, what happens in the lives of mothers, doctors, security guards, jeepney drivers and teachers does not follow a set pattern. It happens haphazardly, guided by the needs and inspirations of the situation.